

A Reading of Alexander Pope's *Epistle to Burlington*

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Reading Alexander Pope (1688-1744) is always difficult and challenging. As in the case of most poets, there will be various ways to approach him. In this paper, as a personal effort to understand Pope, I have extended my frame of reference as far as possible to examine him from a vantage point which we now command. And I have found that the American architectural critic Lewis Mumford's (1895-) insight into the nature of a "healthy art," i.e., reconciliation between functional considerations and aesthetic effect, provides a good starting-point for the discussion of Pope's *Epistle to Burlington* (1731).

In *Art and Technics* Mumford emphasizes the importance of the humanization of technique as an essential condition for a meaningful life. Unlike many other art critics, he is not possessed by the illusion that art will provide the most valid answer to questions about life or that art is after all useless. He recognizes that the desire for art and the desire for technique are intrinsic in human life and that the negation of either one will inevitably impoverish human life. Mumford's brilliant comment on the Secretariat Building of the United Nations is quite illuminating at this point. "That great oblong prism of steel and aluminum and glass, less a building than a gigantic mirror in which the urban landscape of Manhattan is reflected, is in one sense one of the most perfect achievements of modern technics."¹⁾ But in spite

1) *Art and Technics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952), p.128.
All subsequent references to Mumford are from this text.

of its almost perfect constructional conditions—economical conditions, human resources, and humanistic ideals—it fails to be an ideal building. Why? First of all, the overwhelming dominance of the Secretariat over the General Assembly Building is ridiculous—“unless the architects conceived it as a cynical way of expressing the fact that... the real decisions are made in the Secretariat, by the bureaucracy” (p. 129). As a functional unit, it is even more lacking in merit than as a symbol. To create the abstract beauty of an unbroken marble slab on its north and south ends, about a quarter of the perimeter of the building has been sacrificed. And to what purpose?

The result is that a large number of secretaries, instead of working under ideal conditions, as they should in such a building, work in dreary interior cubicles that lack sunlight and air and view: Advantages they might have enjoyed if functional considerations had been sufficiently respected.... The designers of the Secretariat Building sacrificed both mechanical efficiency and human values in order to achieve an empty abstract form, a frozen geometrical concept.... Though mechanically new, it is architecturally and humanly obsolete (pp. 130-32).

Here Mumford's main point is that any artistic effort which does not contribute to the actual working needs of human beings and which ignores human considerations can never result in a truly great work of art.

Pope's *Epistle to Burlington* is primarily about “the use of Riches,” but it is also closely related to Pope's aesthetics, which is similar to that of Mumford. This *Epistle* is a powerful condemnation of the useless show of beauty and empty form, and at the same time it is a persuasive recommendation for the proper *ars poetica*—the fusion of beauty and function.

For Pope, “Pictures, Music, Meats”²⁾ are equally important in human life. Superficially, the juxtaposition of pictures and music and meats

2) *Epistle to Burlington*, line 6. All subsequent references to this poem are indicated only by lines. *The Poems of Alexander Pope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) edited by John Butt is used throughout in this paper.

seems to degrade art, but in reality it does not, because, here, art becomes the essential nourishment of life. Art is not something whose presence or absence makes no difference to human life. Those who consider art as a mere pretty decoration are like those who regard their food or "fine Wife" (line 12) as a mere show piece. Likewise, those who go too far in glorifying the importance of art(or meats) impoverish their lives by their very excessiveness:

Load some vain Church with old Theatric state,
 Turn Arcs of triumph to a Garden-gate;
 Reverse your Ornaments, and hang them all
 On some patch'd dog-hole ek'd with ends of wall,
 Then clap four slices of Pilaster on't,
 That, lac'd with bits of rustic, makes a Front.
 Or call the winds thro' long Arcades to roar,
 Proud to catch cold at a Venetian door;
 Conscious they act a true Palladian part,
 And if they starve, they starve by rules of art.
 (lines 29-38)

In this passage what Pope ridicules is a very common attitude that values art without considering its relationship to life. "Venetian doors" or "Arcs of triumph" are meaningful only when they are in their proper places. If they are uprooted from their living context, they become not only vulgar and ridiculous but harmful. However consciously and systematically applied, "rules of art" cannot produce true works of art; they certainly result in some "vain Church with old Theatric state" and "long Arcades" which invite the north winds in to roar, unless the rules are pursued in relationship with concrete reality. Glorious buildings of Rome were once "things of Use." Excessive exaltation of aesthetic beauty itself and trivialization of art into mere decoration alike constitute "bad taste" of art, in the sense that both of them consider art as something separate and independent from life.

In Timon's Villa, the *exemplum* of bad taste, everything wants to become its own master, an independent and separate entity, not a part of the whole; every part is magnified by its own importance:

To compass this, his building is a Town,
His pond an Ocean, his parterre a Down.

(lines 105-106)

And everything follows "rules of art" blindly and slavishly. The result is boring, monotonous symmetry:

Grove nods at grove, each Alley has a brother,
And half the platform just reflects the other.

(lines 117-18)

Here the natural beauty of the trees is replaced by artificial ingenuity (lines 123-26). "In obedience to a common contemporary fad, Timon had had his bushes tinsured into the shapes of animals and people, an outrageous disfigurement of Nature."³⁾ Human considerations are also ignored for the sake of "show." "A Summer-house" is built "that knows no shade." The terrace and roads are not for human beings, either:

My Lord advances with majestic mien,
.....

First thro' the length of yon hot Terrace sweat,
And when up ten steep slopes you've dragg'd your thighs.

(lines, 127, 130-31)

Like the Secretariat Building of the United Nations, Timon's Villa sacrifices both functional efficiency and human values in order to achieve an empty grandness, which is, in fact, "huge heaps of littleness around! The whole, a labour'd Quarry above ground" (lines 109-10). In this enormous villa, the master Timon himself looks like a "puny insect, shiv'ring at a breeze!" (line 108). Separation of art from life ends up in the corruption of art as well as in the dehumanization of man.

Paradoxically, the very pomposity and grandness of the villa dwarfs

3) James E. Wellington, "Introduction" to *Epistles to Several Persons* (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1963), p. 82.

Timon; his self-exaltation is completed in his self-devaluation. Pope's poetic genius skillfully relates Timon's physical smallness with the emptiness or hollowness of Timon's mind and spirit. What is important to Timon is the age and scarcity of books, not their authors and contents. As in book Two of *The Dunciad* (lines 215-22), here language is corrupted "from language as a conveyor of meaning to language as—literally—*thing* in itself. This results in...books conceived as material body rather than repository of ideas."⁴ For Timon, even prayer is for show, and in his chapel, not solemn music but "light quirks of Music, broken and uneven,/Make the soul dance upon a Jig to Heaven" (lines 143-44). On the painted ceilings of his chapel voluptuous beauty of the Saints who "sprawl...on gilded clouds...bring[s] all Paradise before your eye" (lines 146-48). The cult of art for its own sake leads to this vulgarity.

The same thing is true for Timon's dinner. As a critic aptly explains, it is not an occasion for a relaxed pleasure; it is rather a tantalizing agony:

The guests are...called to the dining-room by 'chiming clocks' that ring out like church bells summoning a congregation. Such a summon directly contrasts to the soft melodious sound that was suggested by the chapel's 'silver-bell'. The dining-table itself is ornamented with 'well-coloured serpents' and 'gaping Tritons' that are quite inappropriate to meal-time, while the dinner that the poet receives is a travesty of what dining should be—"The feast of Reason and the flow of Soul" as Pope describes it in his *Imitation of Horace: Satire II, i*, 128. At Timon's house dining is an occasion for ostentatious show not relaxed conviviality. It is, like Belinda's toilet, a 'sacred rite of pride'. The guests drink and eat in time with the chiming clocks: 'You drink by measure, and to minutes eat'.⁵

Food itself is excellent. But it is not to be enjoyed; it exists for its own sake. Human need, comfort, and entertainment are sacrificed to a

4) Thomas Maresca, *Epic to Novel* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1974), p. 118.

5) I.R.F. Gordon, *A Preface to Pope* (London & New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1976), p. 145.

pretentious show. Man exists for food, not food for man—an ultimate perversion:

So quick retires each flying course, you'd swear
 Sancho's dread Doctor and his Wand were there.
 Between each Act the trembling salvers ring,
 From soup to sweet-wine, and God bless the King.
 In plenty starving, tantaliz'd in state,
 And complaisantly help'd to all I hate,
 Treated, caress'd, and tir'd, I take my leave.

(lines 159-65)

This kind of perversion or separation of art from life pervades everything in Timon's Villa. However grand, excellent, and beautiful by themselves, the building, food, music, and painting ultimately will make human life poor if they take pride in their being isolated and autonomous subjects. A self-important meal makes the guests return home harboring a grudge and curse:

I curse such lavish cost, and little skill,
 And swear no Day was ever past so ill.

(lines 167-68)

And Timon is left alone among "huge heaps of littleness," dwarfed and ridiculous.

For Pope, art should not be a self-reflexive entity; it should contribute to the enrichment of life one way or other. A self-sufficient art may be possible through "taste" and "rules" alone, but art for life's sake can never be achieved without "Good Sense" which is "previous ev'n to Taste." Good Sense is "A Light, which in yourself you must perceive." It cannot be earned; it should be developed within, for it "only is the gift of Heav'n." And all splendor of art comes from Good Sense (lines 41-43). This God-given faculty makes the artist understand what is appropriate to a given context of life and how everything is interrelated:

Still follow Sense, of ev'ry Art the Soul,

Parts answ'ring parts shall slide into a whole,
 Spontaneous beautiës all round advance,
 Start ev'n from Difficulty, strike from Chance;
 Nature shall join you, Time shall make it grow
 A work to wonder at...

(lines 65-70)

Rearing a column, bending an arch, swelling a "terras," or sinking a "grot" is not an isolated, unrelated, independent effort. These parts get meaning only when they are understood as parts in a whole building.

As observed very briefly at the outset of this paper, one striking feature of Pope's use of language in the poem is that he compares the function of art to feeding and its malfunction to starvation. From the start, picture and music are put at the same level as meats and seeing and hearing are equated with eating (lines 5-6). In Timon's garden, the seemingly pretty trees, cut in fantastic shapes, wilt and droop, because of lack of care. "Unwater'd see the drooping sea-horse mourn" (line 125). Corruption of art culminates in corruption of feast in the celebrated dinner scene at Timon's. Art and food for their own sake inevitably result in the impoverishment of life and starvation. "In plenty starving, tantaliz'd in state." And at the end of the poem, the restoration of the proper function of art is suggested by the image of plentiful harvest: "Deep Harvests bury all his pride has plann'd,/And laughing Ceres re-assumes the land" (lines 175-76). This characteristic use of language seems to reflect Pope's view of art: Art is an integral part of life and it is an essential nourishment of life. In *Imitations of Horace: Epistle II, ii*, Pope also compares the poet to the cook; the poet's function becomes the cook's or the host's function:

But after all, what wou'd you have me do?
 When out of twenty I can please not two;
 When this Heroicks only deigns to praise,
 Sharp Satire that, and that Pindaric lays?
 One likes the Pheasant's wing, and one the leg;
 The Vulgar boil, the Learned roast an Egg;
 Hard Task! to hit the Palate of such Guests,
 When Oldfield loves, what Dartineuf detests.

(lines 80-87)

Ordinary people tend to consider art as something for decoration. Ironically, this very common debasement of the function of art comes, to some extent, from the excessive exaltation of art for its own sake, an attitude typified by Timon. And more often than not this idea recognizes its "Native Place" in the separation of art from life. Art which is uprooted from the concrete context of reality becomes either a mere ornament or something self-enclosed. Self-contained art distorts reality and reconstructs it in its own image:

The suff'ring eye inverted Nature sees,
 Trees cut to Statues, Statues thick as trees,
 With here a Fountain, never to be play'd,
 And there a Summer-house, that knows no shade;
 Here Amphitrite sails thro' myrtle bow'rs;
 Un-water'd see the drooping sea-horse mourn,
 And swallows roost in Nilus' dusty Urn.

(lines 119-26)

This distortion or miscreation of reality by self-important art is the "ultimate aim of Dulness"⁶⁾ in *The Dunciad*:

Here gay Description Egypt glads with show'rs,
 Or gives to Zembla fruits, to Barca flow'rs;
 Glitt'ring with ice here hoary hills are seen,
 There painted vallies of eternal green
 In cold December fragrant chaplets blow,
 And heavy harvests nod beneath the snow.

(BK 1, lines 73-78)

Pope believes that if an artist is to achieve the fusion of beauty and function he should "follow Nature." Following nature is the foremost requirement of any art (painting, architecture, or poetry). In Pope's aesthetics, the word "Nature" almost always means the universal principles of order and harmony. Therefore, by following Nature the real harmonious, well-balanced beauty can be achieved and the fantastic extremes, which claim their own independence from the

6) Maresca (1974), p. 112.

whole order, can be avoided. Only in this way "Works without show, and without Pomp presides" (*An Essay on Criticism*, line 75). When the parts and details are exalted for their own sake, the sure result is a distracting and unnatural one. For Pope, what is primarily important is the whole, not the parts in and by themselves:

In Wit, as Nature, what affects our hearts
Is not th'exactness of peculiar parts;
'Tis not a lip, or eye, we beauty call,
But the joint force and full result of all.
(*An Essay on Criticism*, Lines 243-46)

Pope's attack on the vulgarity and absurdity of Timon's building is not limited to the building itself and garden; his denunciation is directed to Timon's way of life and way of thinking as well. This very fact suggests Pope's essential view of art: Creating a work of art is ultimately a moral act. And when we push this basic premise a step further, the poet's essential function should include a vigorous fight against the corruption of life. In Pope's view, the poet should not be a mere objective observer or bystander of human reality; he should be the defender of the virtue and faith, and a heroic fighter "arm'd for Virtue" (*Imitation of Horace: Satire II, i*, line 105). Now the force of a true poem becomes a:

sacred Weapon! left for Truth's defence,
Sole Dread of Folly, Vice, and Insolence!
To all but Heav'n-directed hands deny'd,
The Muse may give thee, but the Gods must guide.
Rev'rent I touch thee! but with honest zeal;
To rowze the Watchman of the Publik Weal,
To Virtue's Work provoke the tardy Hall,
And goad the Prelate Slumb'ring in his Stall.
(*Epilogue to the Satires* (II), lines 212-19)

This view (poem=weapon) is itself an expression of a need to establish order and virtuous harmony here on earth that somehow mirrors and reaffirms cosmic order and justice. Therefore, the poet will not tolerate

any word or person that imposes or contributes to a false order at the expense of the true order:

not a word they [the true poets] spare
That wants or Force, or Light, or Weight, or Care,
Howe'er unwillingly it quits its place,
Nay tho' at Court (perhaps) it may find grace:
Such they'll degrade; and sometimes, in its stead,
In downright Charity revive the dead...
Command old words that long have slept, to wake,
Words, that wise *Bacon*, or brave *Raleigh* spake...
Pour the full Tide of Eloquence along,
Serenely pure, and yet divinely strong.

(*Imitations of Horace: Epistle II, ii*, lines 159-64, 167-68, 171-72)

In this passage, "dealing with words, the poet's activity, is analogous to dealing with people.... The sequence of imagery, emphasizing modes of actions, heightens the importance of poetry as activity, a concept that stands behind the analogies... between the discipline of writing good poetry and that of living a good life."⁷⁾ And as Thomas Maresca indicates, here "poetry becomes... the semisacramental act of a morally good man, an almost divinely ordained messenger."⁸⁾ So, we have now twofold concept of the poet: the fighter and the redeemer or lover of the "Natural" order.

In his *Epistle to Burlington*, Pope, after attacking Timon's misuses of "Riches" and art, adds that Timon's extravagance is useful because it provides the poor with a chance of employment:

Yet hence the Poor are cloath'd, the Hungry fed;
Health to himself, and to his Infants bread
The Lab'rer bears: What his hard heart denies,
His charitable Vanity supplies.

(lines 169-72)

7) Patricia Meyer Spacks, *An Argument of Images: The Poetry of Alexander Pope* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 205-206.

8) Maresca, *Pope's Horatian Poems* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1966), p. 127.

We are not sure whether Pope's striking change of moral point of view, which some critics have severely criticized,⁹⁾ can be fully defended; but there is, at least, one possible defence. The basic structure of the poem is an alternating or simultaneous procedure, by which Pope turns from the abuse of art to its proper use and back again, "but amplifying more on each side as the poem goes on."¹⁰⁾ And the dinner scene is the climax of the abuse of art. If the poem stopped here, it might become a powerful, biting satire against the corruption of art, no more and no less. But the ultimate purpose of the poem lies somewhere else. The violent, almost hysterical denunciation of the perversion of the importance of food and a human being is followed by a "paradoxical and even a providential"¹¹⁾ understanding of the usefulness of Timon's extravagance: "What his hard heart denies,/His charitable Vanity supplies." In this seemingly baffling transition, I believe, the poet Pope's true nature is revealed. At this crucial turning point, the "fighter" poet becomes the "redeemer" poet of ultimate order. Thus, he urges Burlington to restore and repair "falling Arts" and to erect a new order:

You too proceed! make falling Arts your care,
Erect new wonders, and the old repair,
Jones and Palladio to themselves repair.

(lines 191-193)

This kind of transformation of vain extravagance (corruption) into something meaningful (redemption) seems to be a major pattern in Pope.

9) "F.W. Bateson likens this change to the 'Private Vices, Public Benefits' paradox of Mandeville, which is 'much more cogently argued', and Hibbard finds them facile, arguing that 'There is something lacking in the moralist who assumes that the very vice he is attacking has its place in the proper working of things.'" I quote this passage from Howard Erskine-Hill, *The Social Milieu of Alexander Pope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 301.

10) Erskine-Hill, p. 296-97.

11) Wellington, p. 84.

For instance, in *The Rape of the Lock* Belinda's lock, which is extravagantly valued and cherished turns into a star; in *Windsor Forest* Lodona, whose excessive passion for hunting results in her ruin, is changed into a river which bathes the forest. The traditional understanding of Lodona episode is that Lodona becomes a fallen creature by overstepping her boundary, an Eden-like forest. This understanding assumes that Lodona is an innocent Nymph and her "unfallen" state is a perfect world where order and harmony prevail. I don't think it is true. Indeed, there is a sort of order within the "Forest's verdant Limits," but this order is not a natural order. Like the order in Belinda's boudoir and in Timon's Villa, it is an artificial order, of which Lodona is the center and mistress. Lodona dominates but not cooperates with others in that forest. She is a cruel huntress to wound "the flying Deer." She is not only a bloody huntress but also a scornful, wounding Goddess. This very aggressiveness of hers provokes Pan's desire. Belinda was also the Goddess of a false world which was mistaken as an ideal unfallen world. In this world where the Goddess worshiped "the *Cosmetic Pow'rs*," everyone adored the lock; the lock was an object of artificial decoration in the false world where the artificial order prevailed. By losing the exaggerated importance (as the sun), Belinda at the end of the poem regains the proper importance (as a star). In *Windsor Forest* Lodona "the injur'd Maid" is also changed into the river Lodona. Now this former huntress becomes a life-giving river which "bathes the Forest where she rang'd before."

Indeed, metamorphosis is the key to these three poems. And this metamorphosis is closely related to the nature and function of art in Pope. One difference between Timon's case and the two girls' is that in Belinda and Lodona the transformation comes after the real destruction of their vanity (the lock is cut; Lodona is raped), whereas in Timon the change is suggested before the actual destruction of his vanity. In Timon's case, the transformation is seen in his extravagance itself. And the real destruction comes after in the form of transformation:

Another Age shall see the golden Ear
 Imbrown the Slope and nod on the Parterre
 Deep Harvests bury all his pride has plann'd
 And laughing Ceres re-assume the land.

(lines 173-76)

What is significant in these transformation is the nature of the suggested agents of the change. The change of Belinda's lock is seen by the Muse; Lodona is changed into a river by Diana, the goddess of forest, of moon, and of "childbirth"; Timon's house is transformed into a rich field by laughing Ceres, the goddess of agriculture. These agents are all implicitly or explicitly related to the image of a life-giving artist, a redeemer. (As we have seen, Ceres is connected, in this poem, with the poet as a cook or host; Diana, as the goddess of childbirth, is related to the creation of a new life—a divine artwork.) And the most important function of the life-giving artist is envisioned as the restoration of the ultimate order. Belinda, the "sun" of her self-contained world, finds her proper place in the great order or the universe by becoming a star. Lodona, emancipated from her small world of the forest, converses with the ever-widening sea. And a vision of plentiful harvest replaces Timon's monstrous extravagance. Timon's villa ceases to be a place of self-importance. Now, instead of "starving in plenty,"

ample Lawns are not asham'd to feed
 The milky heifer and deserving steed.

(lines 185-86)

Here "the aesthetic, the moral, and the utilitarian are characteristically associated in the 'milky heifer and deserving steed,' which graze the 'ample Lawns' of an eighteenth-century landscape, itself a work of art."¹²⁾ The ultimate oneness of life and art is achieved.

12) F.R. Leavis, *Revaluation* (Chatto & Windus, 1936), p. 79.

ABSTRACT

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Pope's *Epistle to Burlington* is primarily about "the use of Riches," but it is also closely related to Pope's aesthetics. This *Epistle* is a powerful condemnation of the useless show of beauty and empty form, and at the same time it is a persuasive recommendation for the proper *ars poetica*—the fusion of beauty and function. For Pope, art is not something whose presence or absence makes no difference to human life. "Pictures, Music, Meats" are equally important in human life. Those who consider art as a mere pretty decoration are like those who regard their food or wife as a mere show piece. Likewise those who go too far in glorifying the value of art (or meat) impoverish their lives by their very excessiveness.

In Timon's Villa, the *exemplum* of bad taste, everything wants to become its own master, an independent and separate entity, not a part of the whole; every part is magnified by its own importance: "To compass this, this building is a Town,/His pond an Ocean, his parterre a Down." Timon's Villa sacrifices both functional efficiency and human values in order to achieve an empty grandness of form. In this enormous villa, the master Timon himself looks like a "puny insect, shiv'ring at a breeze." Separation of art from life ends up in the corruption of art as well as in the dehumanization of man. The same thing is true for Timon's dinner. Excellent food is not to be enjoyed; it exists for its own sake. Human need, comfort, and entertainment are sacrificed to a pretentious show. Man exists for food, not food for man—an ultimate perversion. This kind of perversion of art pervades everything in Timon's building. For Pope, art should not be a self-reflexive entity; it should contribute to the enrichment of life.

Pope's attack on the vulgarity and absurdity of Timon's house is

not limited to the building itself and garden; his denunciation is directed to Timon's way of life as well. This very fact suggests Pope's essential view of art: Creating a work of art is ultimately a moral act. In his view, the poet should not be a mere objective observer or bystander of human reality; he should be the defender of the virtue and faith, and a heroic fighter "arm'd for Virtue."

But the real purpose of this poem lies somewhere else. The violent, almost savage attack on the perversion of the importance of art and a human being is followed by a paradoxical understanding of the usefulness of Timon's extravagance. In this seemingly baffling transition, the poet Pope's true nature is revealed. Here the "fighter" poet becomes the "redeemer" poet. Thus, he urges Burlington to restore and repair "falling Arts" and to erect a new order. A vision of plentiful harvest replaces Timon's monstrous extravagance. Timon's villa ceases to be a place of self-importance. Now, instead of "starving in plenty,... ample Lawns are not asham'd to feed/The milky heifer and deserving steed." The ultimate oneness of life and art is achieved.

